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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 YEREVAN 002903

SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPT FOR EUR/CACEN, EUR/PPD, EUR/ACE

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [AM](#)

SUBJECT: ARMENIAN STUDENTS DISCUSS GEORGIA, POLITICS,
FOREIGN AFFAIRS

1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Please protect accordingly.

SUMMARY

2. (U) PAS invited 11 students from the political science department of Yerevan State University to the Embassy November 26 to discuss their perceptions of the 'velvet revolution' in neighboring Georgia with poloff and econoff. The students provided an interesting commentary not just on events in Georgia, but also on the Armenian political opposition, Armenia's relations with the rest of world, and generational gaps in political consciousness. The students generally favored stability over striking political change, and argued that Armenia's future would necessarily be linked to Russia's. End Summary.

THE STUDENTS: REPRESENTING A SMALL BUT DISTINCT GROUP

3. (U) We invited 11 undergraduate students majoring in political science at Yerevan State University to the Embassy November 26 for a roundtable discussion on the recent events in Georgia. The students were all proficient English speakers, and 10 had spent some time in the United States (the other had lived and studied in Moscow for seven years), eight in the FSA-funded FLEX program (for high school students) and two in the Undergraduate Program. They described their parents as educated, and agreed that their families belonged to the emerging Armenian middle class. They asserted that their foreign language skills and time spent abroad did not separate them from the majority of other students studying similar coursework at Yerevan State. On all the issues discussed, from the political opposition in Armenia to relations with Turkey, the students held generally uniform views that they claimed were representative of their peers at the university.

GOOD FOR THE GEORGIANS, BUT WHAT ABOUT OUR ECONOMY?

4. (U) The students' initial comments about the situation in Georgia focused on its strategic impact on Armenia. The students pointed out that any sustained period of instability in Georgia could have "catastrophic" consequences for the Armenian economy. They argued that even a short-lived crisis could have a dramatic impact on Armenia's supplies of everything from power to consumer goods. Some students hypothesized that if Georgia were to descend into chaos, the United States would be forced to place substantial pressure on Turkey to open its border with Armenia to avert a humanitarian crisis. When pressed, the students addressed their perceptions of the "velvet revolution" in Tbilisi. They all agreed that they were "proud" and "glad for" the Georgians, who, they felt, were living in an incredibly corrupt and "failed" state. One student observed that "all the preconditions for revolution" were in place in Georgia.

WHY NOT HERE?

5. (SBU) The students also agreed that the situation in Armenia after the presidential and parliamentary elections earlier in the year was completely different than that in Georgia. While the students acknowledged that there were clearly some falsifications in the Armenian elections, they believed the outcomes were not seriously altered. Unlike Georgia, Armenia had registered substantial improvements in the standard of living over the past four to five years, and the students argued that most people did not see the need for the government to deviate greatly from its current

policies. Most important, however, was the lack of a viable opposition. The students stated that aside from not having an effective agenda, the opposition in Armenia did not have effective leaders. The students could point to no one, in politics or not, who they found either inspiring or a worthy challenger to the current political elite. The students concurred with one of their colleague's statement that "Stepan Demirchian (head of the opposition Justice Bloc in the National Assembly, and failed candidate for president) would be no one if he didn't look like his father" (former National Assembly Speaker Karen Demirchian assassinated in 1999, who remains a hero in the hearts and minds of the opposition).

GENERATIONAL SPLIT

16. (U) The students stated that they and their friends in the university felt Armenia was generally on the right track, and by definition they were "pro-stability" and not active in politics. All but one of the eleven students voted for incumbent President Kocharian in the March 2003 run-off election, and they laughed when the one dissenter declared she voted for Demirchian because "he wasn't as corrupt." (Note: The student who voted for Demirchian said that she did not attend any opposition rallies, as those were for the "unemployed." End Note.) They agreed that their views were generally representative of their classmates, but diverged from those of educated Armenians 10-15 years older. Armenians in their thirties, whose formative experiences included the break-up of the Soviet Union and the difficult early transition years, were more likely to be active in the political process and have a more reformist outlook than students currently studying in the university, they maintained. The students felt that the mentality of the slightly older educated generation remained shaped by the political idealism of the late 1980's and early 1990's.

"RUSSIA IS A TRUE FRIEND"

17. (SBU) The students agreed that Russia was Armenia's "best friend." When asked what it meant to be "pro-Russian", one student stated that it was a recognition of the cultural ties between Russians and Armenians and the "strategic reality" of Armenia's geography and current political isolation. They said that most professors in the university espoused this philosophy, which was reinforced by parents at home. The students hoped that Russia would move ideologically "westward" and consequently help pull Armenia into Europe, but claimed that Armenia could not independently decide upon that path. The students voiced substantial resentment of Turkey owing to the economic hardships imposed by the Turkish blockade rather than the events of 1915. They viewed the United States as guilty by association, having chosen to align itself with Turkey, and therefore having decided not push too hard for the opening of the border. While the students seemed to respect American ideals, they felt a much closer bond with Russia and Russians who had shown unwavering support for Armenia.

COMMENT

18. (SBU) The roundtable discussion with the students exposed two interesting, and perhaps surprising, characteristics that they claimed were also representative of their peers at the university. First, the students were politically conservative. They generally approved of the current state of affairs in Armenia and stressed the importance of continued stability in the country. Instead of noting that the Armenian opposition had legitimate concerns over the conduct of the 2003 elections, the students expressed relief that demonstrations and protests were short-lived and not destabilizing. Even more significant, despite their experiences in the United States, the students described themselves as "pro-Russian." They did not feel that the strategic need to be strongly aligned with Russia had any notable negative effect on Armenia, nor did it contradict with integration into Euro-Atlantic structures. These two opinions, if widely held, indicate that Armenians who will be expected to fill leadership positions in 15-20 years do not hold views on domestic or foreign policy that differ significantly from those of the current political leadership.

